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ABSTRACT

One result of the new culture of violence in the schools, and the corresponding shift in attention and resources away from learning activities and towards new security strategies, is the strong likelihood of a notable drop in student achievement levels. Fallout from the crisis in urban high schools carries over to community colleges and universities as these institutions inherit underprepared and underskilled students. Another kind of violence occurs on a more frequent and subtle basis--the relentless and systematic negation of the values, language, and practices of oppressed students in countless learning situations. As urban students experience school failure there is often a corresponding effect in the community. Providing opportunities for the students to confront their own powerlessness and to act of and for themselves in a community literacy project has the potential for negotiating a pedagogy of dialog and dignity in place of the pedagogy of insidious and subtle oppression that has been the main topic of the literature of literacy liberation for some time, most notably in Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." In the summer of 1991, eight teenagers from an inner-city high school in Pittsburgh began work on a project called HELP that involved the planning, design, and construction of an outdoor courtyard at a senior citizen's center in the community. Negotiating the four group goals was the key to the success of the project. Community-based projects can point educators towards an expanded and more inclusive view of what it means to be literate. (Lists of what the HELP team built and the group goals are attached.) (RS)

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Literacy, Schooling, and Violence: Can Community Literacy Help?

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A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Diego, April, 1993.

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Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate men from their own decision-making is to change t'.em into objects. -- Paulo Freire, ***Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

At the time that I first contemplated this article, nearly a year ago, I was excited at the prospect of investigating the connection of violence with literacy in my experience with urban students. I had expected that I would be able to describe in detail the many instances in which my students are the object of a systematic type of 'violence' that is inherent in modern education systems operating in big cities today. But it turns out now that another type of "violence" is very much on my mind. As I start each morning at a troubled urban high school in Pittsburgh, I find myself wondering if any of my students will be victims of s dirty, brutal kind of violence today -- by this I mean will they be punched, beat up, shot at. And I wonder if I or one of my colleagues will be the victims of a physical assault, as has been the case at least twice this school year. I find myself wondering if today is the day that someone will shoot someone else in our school.

The immediate effects this kind of violence has had within urban schools is to cause a radical shift in attention away from strategies for teaching and motivating students to finding ways to "keep the lid on" the buildings we teach in. Understandably, it has become an absolute first priority to keep the physical environment of urban schools safe for students as well as for school personnel. Pittsburgh, an urban school district widely praised for innovation and comparatively high levels of student achievement, is still far from meeting even its own expectations

for student performance. One result of the new culture of violence in our schools, and the corresponding shift in attention and resources away from learning activities and towards new security strategies, is the strong likelihood that we could begin to see a notable drop in levels of student achievement. As we react to violence in schools, students may be in danger of learning even less in school than they are now.

Urban "fallout"

Fallout from the crisis situation in urban high schools has carried over to community colleges and universities, public and private, as these institutions inherit more and more under-prepared and under-skilled students. Basic reading and writing classes are jammed, especially in public colleges and universities, as many of these institutions are forced to play a remedial role in the educative process. It's clear that one way or another, nearly all educators in the public education system, from preschool to four year university programs are being faced with the formidable challenges our troubled urban communities present to us. Those urban students who are able to move into post-secondary institutions are exceptional students, the lucky ones. But they are often victims of another type of violence -- the type of violence I had originally planned to focus on exclusively in this article.

This kind of violence occurs on a more frequent and subtle basis. It's not the kind of violence that makes national headlines, but it's the kind of violence that has been a main topic in the literature of liberation literacy for some time now. It is framed in a perhaps familiar passage from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> Any situation in which `A' objectively exploits `B' or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with man's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has *already* begun. (40)

This is a kind of insidious and subtle oppression which permeates educational institutions at all levels. There is no self-affirmation in being constantly reminded that the ways you speak and act are not valid means of expression within the educational institutions you must participate in. For example, I know it's nothing less than violence when my friends and students from oppressed neighborhoods in Pittsburgh experience the relentless and systematic negation of their values, language, and practices in countless learning situations. ("Maybe *you* do that at home, but *we* don't act like that" ..."Those kinds of books/stories/ music have no place here" ... or "A better way to say that would be ..." ... "You need to raise your hand if you want to say something in this class.") In these situations, no one's getting shot and no one's getting beat up, but I worry about these and more subtle methods of preventing others from engaging in free inquiry.

Two Views of Violence and Literacy

In a1991 book by J. Elspeth Stuckey called *The Violence of Literacy*, Stuckey argues that literacy itself is a tool of oppression. In an exhaustive and penetrating survey of current thinking on literacy, even radical educators like Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux are taken to task for their varying degrees of participation in the public debate about *which literacies* could be legitimate aims of education. Stuckey argues

that literacy itself, or rather the way we think about literacy as a *credential* or set of reified standards, is the core of the problem. She claims that submitting to the temptation to take part in the debate of what is and is not a legitimate literate practice is itself an accommodation to those who would invoke the oppression of literacy.

> Theories and pedagogies of literacy set the parameters for interchange. Acquisition becomes the mediator of social relations; teaching, the arbiter. This is to say that literacy is a function of culture, social experience, and sanction. Literacy education begins in the ideas of the socially and economically dominant class ... The teaching of literacy, in turn, is a regulation of access. (19)

Literacy is never neutral, but always " ... contextual -- always about something, a content, a subject." Any set of standards serves to demarcate literate achievement in any given group of students, setting up the unavoidable condition of one group who, more or less, "get it" (the skill or technology in question) and another group who, more or less, doesn't. The next step is to confer a credential of "literacy" -- a stamp of approval variously titled as a degree, certificate, passing grade, merit badge etc. -- on those who can meet a standard set by those who already possess the currency of the realm (whichever "literacy" is being "taught"). (This reminds me of Frederick Erickson who calls diplomas earned at many urban high schools "docility certificates".) Thus we have constructed *ideologies* of literacy which, by virtue of their instrumental power to influence or determine levels of income and social standing, serve as instruments of mass oppression. Stuckey says:

> The theory in this study is that literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within certain given populations and against individual people. The third world is oppressed by

> the system of literacy of the first world; ghetto blacks are oppressed by the American system of literacy education... Literacy oppresses, and it is less important whether or not the oppression is systematic and intentional... than that it works against freedom. (64)

Far from the liberatory medium envisioned by Paulo Freire and others who have advanced the cause of human freedom through the acquisition of "word and work", Stuckey sees literacy as a tool of alienation, a powerful set of relationships and positions in the world which serve to separate and demarcate individuals and groups from one another.

Stuckey's book is a difficult book to read. For one thing, there is the relentlessly strident tone, which can be overpowering. Then the rather expansive treatment (and dismissal) of the work of literally dozens of theorists from Freire and Giroux, to Scribner and Cole which leaves a reader wondering what Stuckey would have an educator do in the cause of liberatory pedagogy. (Can we do anything right?) Still, the power of this book is that it requires a reader to vigorously and critically assess what effect she is having on the students we propose to "liberate". As a result of reading this book, I wondered then, and I wonder now -- have I too been an unwitting, but nonetheless efficient, perpetrator of this sort of "violence" upon the young people I work with and teach in schools and the community?

I haven't decided for sure, but in the course of reassessing the effects of my work I have been energized to participate in the design and implementation of a series of learning occasions in which urban students have been able to find a way to confront their own powerlessness -- in which they have been able to act of and for themselves -- within a community context which normally may have served to obstruct and suppress them. We call it 'community literacy'. As my experience in

urban education broadens and intensifies, I am all the more impressed with the potential of community literacy for negotiating a pedagogy of dialogue and dignity with urban students. Later I will provide a short description of a learning project I worked on in the Summer of 1991 in which a number of discreet literate acts were incorporated into the overall project, but first I want to outline another important part of the problem with literacy and urban students -- the condition of powerlessness.

I think Saul Alinsky's definition of power as *the ability to act* helps frame the issue of what's at stake when we are confronted in modern classrooms with reluctant, even hostile students. Most of the urban students I meet have litte power -- little ability to act -- on nearly any idea of import or meaningful condition affecting their lives. They are utterly powerless. It will help to think of powerlessness then, as this *absence* of the ability to act. It is this brutal fact of powerlessness, the stark, cold truth of a whole generation of young people who know they are disconnected from the mainstream of the life going on all around them, that is the root of our problem. No wonder they are "turned off" by school learning; no wonder they resist "education"; no wonder they are hostile. Confronted by a powerful, imperious institution (the public education system) urban students must decide whether or not to participate in an institution whose rules they are not expected to understand or affirm, but simply follow. The offer we make our students is no offer at all, but an ultimatum -- here it is; this is what you need (at any rate, *it is what we say you need*) -- and this is how you will get it. They know they have little power to shape their experience in this institution, and certainly no power to *change* that institution. Education,

for them, has become a train running down a one-way track. We say get on, get out of the way -- or get run over.

In contrast, I am reminded of the Socratic dialogue in which Socrates inquires of Protagoras (on behalf of Hippocrates) "what effect" Protagoras could promise to have on a student who should come to study under him. "Progress toward a better state", is the rather indistinct reply at first. But naturally, Socrates interrogates further and finally, Protagoras is pressed to answer that the student will learn "the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the state's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as speaker and man of action" (50).

The role of the teacher is clarified as the dialogue continues: the offer made by Protagoras to his student is the opportunity to acquire power, both personal and public. Can we, as modern educators, say the same?

Community Literacy

Education is, as John Dewey says, a social function. But too often in schools (including universities)

> we reach the ordinary notion of education: the notion which ignores its social necessity and its identity with all human association that affects conscious life, and which identifies it with imparting information about remote matters and the conveying of learning through verbal signs: the acquisition of literacy(8-9).

I cite Dewey not to support an anti-literacy agenda (nor to support Dewey's restrictive and simplistic conception of literacy here), but rather to emphasize the point that the social environment we call communities, from which our students come to us-- consisting of "conditions that

promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the *characteristic* activities of a living being" (Dewey,11) -- is not the same as the artificially constructed environments that are classrooms, schools, and universities. The environment that is a school is a *created* environment, consciously constructed by professional educators who "know" what environment is suitable for learning. The special environment that is school is (as Dewey says) "the only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get... by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel." (18-19)

If we accept Dewey's basic hypothesis that the public school system is *the* critical institution for construction of the genuinely democratic communities necessary for the well-being of American society, we can understand that as urban students experience school failure there is often a corresponding effect in the community. As students drop out or are dropped from the public educational system, they often drop into the underlife of our urban communities. The result is a profound sense of disconnectedness, a deeply entrenched lack of shared goals and concerns. We find ourselves faced with a sizable part of a whole generation of urban students who are nominally in the community, but certainly not of the community.

Working in schools and projects with urban students yields insights into how these young people perceive themselves. Time and again, they have conveyed a sense of themselves as outsiders or "bad actors", often misunderstood, rarely trusted by their elders, and always the first to bear the brunt of a bad rap. There is almost always a lack of any sense of belonging to the community, but instead a sense that the community at large perceives them as viciously preying upon and

victimizing the general populace. They feel they are perceived as "outlaws", perpetrators of a wide range of anti-social activities -- disconnected and remote from the core of the community.

This is where Frederick Erickson's notion of *civility* (1984) figures prominently. Erickson defines civility as *a social contract that involes assent by the learner for mutual commitment to participation in society.* Erickson, an anthropologist, is concerned that " ... given that for approximately 5 million years human societies have managed to rear their young so that almost every one in the society was able to master the knowledge and skills necessary for survival, why does this not happen in modern societies with schools" (207)? He goes on to detail the inequitable sets of power relations that occur in schools, with learners (and often teachers) having no role in shaping learning tasks, nor in choosing or using tools of evaluation. In view of such an externally-determined learning dynamic, Erickson posits that "student disruption and resistance to learning ... are reasonable responses..." (216). To enact civility in a modern urban learning situation then, we would first need to negotiate the task parameters. Students and adult leaders need to affirm that the particular work we are proposing to do is worth doing, that this work has a purpose which we can articulate, as well as utility in the context of the communties in which we interact. Students could then choose to act -- to participate in the process we are calling education -- which may now become a means of participation in the life of the community.

When recognition of the need to do specific work emerges organically in the process of taking the instrumental steps required to meet goals and objectives we set ourselves, we are beginning to enable

free inquiry -- avoiding violence. When we are able to begin a dialogue from which a specific task to be performed by a specific group of people within a specific community can be posed, we are better able to choose the work we -- teachers and students together -- can affirm as work worth commiting to.

The Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center

In the Summer of 1991 eight teenagers from an inner-city high school in Pittsburgh began work on a project (called HELP) that involved the planning, design, and construction of an outdoor courtyard at a senior citizen's center in the community. The teenagers were recruited from a particularly challenged high school situated on Pittsburgh's Northside by adult leaders from the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center (CLC), a new learning initiative also located on the Northside of Pittsburgh, which is funded by a local Foundation .A fundamental goal of the Community Literacy Center is to create alternative learning models for at risk urban students. The CLC, a community-university collaborative between the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon University and the Community House, a 75 year old community-based institution, operates with a view of literacy that affirms that reading, writing, and speaking are important kinds of *actions* people can take in their lives. A goal of the CLC is to create learning occassions within real community situations in which people can become able to act effectively of and for themselves. The HELP project I describe in this article was one of the first attempts to incorporate our ideals into a comprehensive strategy for community learning.

The HELP Project

In the HELP project team members would meet for two hours per day three times a week over seven weeks. Each student participant would be paid a stipend of $100 upon the completion of the project. Recruits to the project knew beforehand that we would be linking work in the community with planning and writing in an attempt to understand the interconnectedness of a wide range of tasks not normally associated with learning and literacy, but which, we expected, would be nonetheless necesarry for successfully completing the community work.

The Early Phases of the Project: Task Negotiation, Goal Setting

Negotiating the Task

The first HELP session was designed to orient the students and adult leaders to each other, to identify and get a feeling for the various communities from which the participants (including the adults) came, and to explore the rationale for beginning a project that would involve improving a public space used by senior citizens in the community. Each participant was asked to consider her particular neighborhood and then provide, in writing, a physical description of the immediate neighborhood, a sense of problems prevalent in the neighborhood, and to focus on at least one good aspect of living in that neighborhood. Adults and students then used their texts to generate a discussion of neighborhood dynamics -- Who are the important people in a neighborhood? Which group causes most of the trouble in neighborhoods? What are the most pervasive problems facing each community? What could we hope to accomplish in our project that might change things in the community?

From this discussion emerged a set of common characteristics: not one of the eight teenagers were able to identify a specific community leader; each teenager rated their peers as the source of most of the trouble in the neighborhood (they were careful to exempt themselves from the "troublesome" activities); all of the teenagers were worried about the growing presence of drugs and violence; and six of eight expressed a desire to demonstrate that "not all teenagers cause problems". Another interesting dynamic also emerged in our first discussion -- the realization that in most communities older citizens and young people were often at odds. The teenagers said that the old folks always blamed them for much of the crime, vandalism, and litter in the neighborhoods; the teenagers, reluctantly agreed that this was often the case. They complained, however, that *all* young people in the community, regardless of whether or not they were participating in such activity, were taking the rap for it.

Our discussion enabled us to consider an idea for a project involving the improvement of a facility for senior citizens in the area. Students were shown slides of the proposed site and a discussion of the possible merits of doing such work followed. The site, an outdoor space adjacent to a senior citzen's recreation center in the neighborhood, was in general disrepair, and any number of improvements to the space would be possible and desirable. Everyone agreed, although with various degrees of enthusiasm, that it would be a good idea to use an improvement project like this one as an example to the older folks that not all teenagers are troublemakers and criminals. We had agreed in principle to the task: working on a project at the senior citizen's site.

Group Goals

Our next step was to negotiate group goals -- this, it turned out, was the key to the success of the project. Negotiating the group goals and working out the decision to do the improvement project at the seniors center set a pattern for a way of working together that would carry throughout the project. No one member of our group -- student or adult-- would be able to dictate what the group would do. Instead, we had to learn to argue and persuade in order to get our ideas adopted. The group goals became our primary focus; the group came to insist that no activity should be started, or even contemplated, unless that activity would contribute to the realization of one of the goals. Consequently, we had to negotiate smaller tasks each time we came together, making us all aware that if we had an idea, we needed to learn how to show the others that the activity we had in mind would be an effective means of meeting one of our goals.

Goal #1: A Completed Work Project

We still had to decide what to build and how to build it. But first it became clear that we needed to establish a distinct idea of what we wanted to accomplish as a result of doing the project. We needed to be able to identify and clearly articulate the specific goals we would set. Setting goals started out easy. The teenagers were serious about proving they could do serious work in the community. Too often, they said, they had heard about young people with good ideas who never followed through on them. "A month of talking and a day of working," is how one participant characterized similar community-based projects she had been involved with in the past. Rarely, the students said, were they

involved in community work that actually got completed. If our project was going to be any different, we had to be serious about finishing what we started. Consequently, we agreed on HELP team Goal # 1: A *Completed* Work Project.

Goal #2: Positive Interaction With Seniors

The students were also concerned that, in an attempt to counteract widespread opinion among older citizens in the community regarding teenagers as troublemakers and criminals, they be able to establish a positive relationship with at least some of the seniors who used the center. Some of them were dubious of the prospects of success in reaching this goal ("They hate us!"). But other students were more hopeful and insisted on giving it a try, and so goal #2 was adopted: Positive Interaction with the Seniors. One measure we took in order to meet this goal was to conduct interviews with the Seniors at the center. This would also enable us to get feedback on our ideas for the courtyard, but we had this goal of positve interaction foremost in mind when we decided to conduct interviews. (It worked -- we did practice interviews on one another in order to prepare for the actual interviews, and the team was elated when they were eventually praised by the seniors for their friendly, professional manner in conducting the interviews.)

Goal #3: A Completed HELP Document

The heavy hand of the project leaders was in evidence in the adoption of goal # 3: A Completed HELP Document. The students weren't

as enthusiastic about this goal as they were the other three; still, they were willing to negotiate. Many of them saw it as a concession to the old people working on the project (the project leaders), whose feelings they didn't want to hurt. And as long as we could guarantee that it wouldn't be like "school-writing", well maybe it wouldn't be so bad. We argued that a published project document would enable us to get our story out to a much larger audience than would actually be able to see our work. Also, it would give us a chance to explain, in our own words and in our own ways, just what went on in the course of completing the project. Although none of the team members would cite this part of the project as the high point of the seven weeks, attitudes towards writing evolved to a more purposeful approach as the usefulness of such a document began to become apparent. Once we had an understanding of what our writing could contribute towards reaching some of our goals (#2 and #4), writing became an activity we were all willing to devote time and energy to.

Goal # 4: Recognition

This was a surprise to most of the adults working on the project. We hadn't expected that the students would be so adamant regarding the issue of getting credit for doing good work. All of the teenagers expressed a strong concern that other responsible members of the community take notice of their work in this project. The students believed that urban teenagers got nothing but bad press, and reasoned that if they were successful in completing this project, it was reasonable to expect that local media and community leaders take notice. As the weeks went by, this issue of recognition would become a prime motivator, and in fact the **Community Conversation**, a public meeting which the HELP team

planned and executed, turned out to be the primary learning occassion in the entire project. As is evidenced by the accompanying Literate Acts chart, a rich and varied menu of communication skills were necessary in order to make our community conversation a success. If we expected to be successful in conducting the community conversation, we needed to learn how to become adept at such sophisticated practices as composing written press releases and verbally communicating with representatives of a variety of media organizations (TV. newspaper, radio).

The community conversation was a substantial learning occasion especially because the need to perform specific tasks arose organically in the process of the group working towards its adopted goals. What's more, project leaders were able to avoid playing traditional authoritarian roles which often set up teacher/adult/powerful person choosing and directing work and the student/powerless person performing chosen tasks.

Stop the Violence?

Will the practice of task negotiation and education that requires dialogue and engagement stop the fighting and killing in our schools and cities? Will 'civility' enable all kinds of learners to stop resisting classroom instruction, to become vital participants in authenitc democratic practices? Does an expanded view of literacy make the offer of education an offer our students might be more likely to choose? As the kids say -- Naw, it ain't all that, but it's some of that.

I am suggesting that community-based projects like the HELP project can point us in a new direction away from a monolithic conception of literacy, and towards an expanded and more inclusive view of what it means to be literate and capable in the modern world. Tasks

involving a wide range of technologies -- from reading an architect's rule to gaining facility with a 3/4 inch drill -- become worthy and meaningful skills in the course of completing a community project. Social skills which require simple, as well as sophisticated levels of communication, from interviewing to document design, have been a regular part of every community-based project we have done at the Community Literacy Center. All of the work done in all of the projects has been the result of a negotiation -- though to varying degrees -- betweeen literacy leaders and students. Learning objectives are based less on what is desirable than on what is possible in any given community context -- standards emerge organically and baselines of behavior are established by those who are in action in association with others. In good projects, the tyranny of literacy is neutralized as a real community of word and work is initiated. The violence of literacy is negotiable.

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What Did the HELP Team Build?

The HELP team designed and built the following at the Perry South Senior Center on Pittsburgh's Northside during the Summer HELP project in 1991:

- **Steps leading to a 3' wide wooden walkway**
- **3' wide wooden walkway through landscaped area (extending 60')**
- **wooden railings along steps and walkway**
- **36' of trellises along brick wall**
- **installed wood and wrought iron bench along walkway**
- **planted 6 full-sized trees throughout landscaped area**
- **completed landscaping services (removed weeds and debris, planted flowers and ground cover, placed mulch throughout landscaped area).**

Literate Acts: The HELP Project
Group Goals

A Completed Work Project	Positive Interaction with Seniors	Project Document	Recognition
•working with architect's site drawings •revising site plans •budgeting and ordering materials • acting as "on-site coordinators" •estimating costs • tree selection and planting •facility with tools (power and hand tools)	•Interviews with seniors • Post-interview reflections • co-planning agenda for community conversation •cooperative interactions at the work site	•Document design •Planning/layout of document •Collaborative planning • co-authoring articles for publication •Profiles of each other	•HELP site sign *Community Conversation* •Scripts for presentation •Planning Agenda • Composing letters of invitation • Planning and presenting slide and individual presentations •Composing press release • Follow-up phone calls to media, city, school officials •Chairing a public meeting (150 people) • Acting as media spokespeople

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